

HOW HEZBOLLAH DEFEATED ISRAEL

PART 1: Winning the intelligence war

By Alastair Crooke and Mark Perry

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Introduction

Writing five years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, US military expert Anthony Cordesman published an account of the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict. "Preliminary Lessons of the Israeli-Hezbollah War" created enormous interest in the Pentagon, where it was studied by planners for the Joint Chiefs of Staff and passed hand-to-hand among military experts in Washington. Cordesman made no secret of his modest conclusions, rightly recognizing that his study was not only "preliminary", but that it took no account of how Hezbollah fought the conflict or judged its results.

"This analysis is ... limited," Cordesman noted, "by the fact that no matching visit was made to Lebanon and to the Hezbollah." Incomplete though it might have been, Cordesman's study accomplished two goals: it provided a foundation for understanding the war from the Israeli point of view and it raised questions on how and how well Hezbollah fought. Nearly two months after the end of the Israeli-Hezbollah war, it is now possible to fill in some of the lines left blank by Cordesman.

The portrait that we give here is also limited. Hezbollah officials will neither speak publicly nor for the record on how they fought the conflict, will not detail their deployments, and will not discuss their future strategy. Even so, the lessons of the war from Hezbollah's perspective are now beginning to emerge and some small lessons are being derived from it by US and Israeli strategic planners. Our conclusions are based on on-the-ground assessments conducted during the course of the war, on interviews with Israeli, American and European military experts, on emerging understandings of the conflict in discussions with military strategists, and on a network of senior officials in the Middle East who were intensively interested in the war's outcome and with whom we have spoken.

Our overall conclusion contradicts the current point of view being retailed by some White House and Israeli officials: that Israel's offensive in Lebanon significantly damaged Hezbollah's ability to wage war, that Israel successfully degraded Hezbollah's military ability to prevail in a future conflict, and that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), once deployed in large numbers in southern Lebanon, were able to prevail over their foes and dictate a settlement favorable to the Israeli political establishment.

Just the opposite is true. From the onset of the conflict to its last operations, Hezbollah commanders successfully penetrated Israel's strategic and tactical decision-making

cycle across a spectrum of intelligence, military and political operations, with the result that Hezbollah scored a decisive and complete victory in its war with Israel.

The intelligence war

In the wake of the conflict, Hezbollah general secretary Hassan Nasrallah admitted that Israel's military response to the abduction of two of its soldiers and the killing of eight others at 9:04 on the morning of July 12 came as a surprise to the Hezbollah leadership.

Nasrallah's comment ended press reports that Hezbollah set out purposely to provoke a war with Israel and that the abductions had been part of a plan approved by Hezbollah and Iran. While Hezbollah had made it clear over a period of years that it intended to abduct Israeli soldiers, there was good reason to suppose that it would not do so in the middle of the summer months - when large numbers of affluent Shi'ite families from the diaspora would be visiting Lebanon (and spending their money in the Shi'ite community), and when Gulf Arabs were expected to arrive in large numbers in the country.

Nor is it the case, as was initially reported, that Hezbollah coordinated its activities with Hamas. Hamas was taken by surprise by the abductions and, while the Hamas leadership defended Hezbollah actions, in hindsight it is easy to see why they might not have been pleased by them: over the course of the conflict Israel launched multiple military operations against Hamas in Gaza, killing dozens of fighters and scores of civilians. The offensive went largely unnoticed in the West, thereby resuscitating the adage that "when the Middle East burns, the Palestinians are forgotten".

In truth, the abduction of the two Israeli soldiers and the killing of eight others took the Hezbollah leadership by surprise and was effected only because Hezbollah units on the Israeli border had standing orders to exploit Israeli military weaknesses. Nasrallah had himself long signaled Hezbollah's intent to kidnap Israeli soldiers, after former prime minister Ariel Sharon reneged on fulfilling his agreement to release all Hezbollah prisoners - three in all - during the last Hezbollah-Israeli prisoner exchange.

The abductions were, in fact, all too easy: Israeli soldiers near the border apparently violated standing operational procedures, left their vehicles in sight of Hezbollah emplacements, and did so while out of contact with higher-echelon commanders and while out of sight of covering fire.

We note that while the Western media consistently misreported the events on the Israeli-Lebanon border, Israel's Ha'aretz newspaper substantially confirmed this account: "A force of tanks and armored personnel carriers was immediately sent into Lebanon in hot pursuit. It was during this pursuit, at about 11am ... [a] Merkava tank drove over a powerful bomb, containing an estimated 200 to 300 kilograms of explosives, about 70 meters north of the border fence. The tank was almost completely destroyed, and all four crew members were killed instantly. Over the next several hours,

IDF soldiers waged a fierce fight against Hezbollah gunmen ... During the course of this battle, at about 3pm, another soldier was killed and two were lightly wounded."

The abductions marked the beginning of a series of IDF blunders that were compounded by commanders who acted outside of their normal border procedures. Members of the patrol were on the last days of their deployment in the north and their guard was down. Nor is it the case that Hezbollah fighters killed the eight Israelis during their abduction of the two. The eight died when an IDF border commander, apparently embarrassed by his abrogation of standing procedures, ordered armored vehicles to pursue the kidnappers. The two armored vehicles ran into a network of Hezbollah anti-tank mines and were destroyed. The eight IDF soldiers died during this operation or as a result of combat actions that immediately followed it.

That an IDF unit could wander so close to the border without being covered by fire and could leave itself open to a Hezbollah attack has led Israeli officers to question whether the unit was acting outside the chain of command. An internal commission of inquiry was apparently convened by senior IDF commanders in the immediate aftermath of the incident to determine the facts in the matter and to review IDF procedures governing units acting along Israel's northern border. The results of that commission's findings have not yet been reported.

Despite being surprised by the Israeli response, Hezbollah fighters in southern Lebanon were placed on full alert within minutes of the kidnappings and arsenal commanders were alerted by their superiors. Hezbollah's robust and hardened defenses were the result of six years of diligent work, beginning with the Israeli withdrawal from the region in 2000. Many of the command bunkers designed and built by Hezbollah engineers were fortified, and a few were even air-conditioned.

The digging of the arsenals over the previous years had been accompanied by a program of deception, with some bunkers being constructed in the open and often under the eyes of Israeli drone vehicles or under the observation of Lebanese citizens with close ties to the Israelis. With few exceptions, these bunkers were decoys. The building of other bunkers went forward in areas kept hidden from the Lebanese population. The most important command bunkers and weapons-arsenal bunkers were dug deeply into Lebanon's rocky hills - to a depth of 40 meters. Nearly 600 separate ammunition and weapons bunkers were strategically placed in the region south of the Litani.

For security reasons, no single commander knew the location of each bunker and each distinct Hezbollah militia unit was assigned access to three bunkers only - a primary munitions bunker and two reserve bunkers, in case the primary bunker was destroyed. Separate primary and backup marshaling points were also designated for distinct combat units, which were tasked to arm and fight within specific combat areas. The security protocols for the marshaling of troops was diligently maintained. No single Hezbollah member had knowledge of the militia's entire bunker structure.

Hezbollah's primary arsenals and marshaling points were targeted by the Israeli Air Force (IAF) in the first 72 hours of the war. Israel's commanders had identified these

bunkers through a mix of intelligence reports - signals intercepts from Hezbollah communications, satellite-reconnaissance photos gleaned from cooperative arrangements with the US military, photos analyzed as a result of IAF overflights of the region, photos from drone aircraft deployed over southern Lebanon and, most important, a network of trusted human-intelligence sources recruited by Israeli intelligence officers living in southern Lebanon, including a large number of foreign (non-Lebanese) nationals registered as guest workers in the country.

The initial attack on Hezbollah's marshaling points and major bunker complexes, which took place in the first 72 hours of the war, failed. On July 15, the IAF targeted Hezbollah's leadership in Beirut. This attack also failed. At no point during the war was any major Hezbollah political figure killed, despite Israel's constant insistence that the organization's senior leadership had suffered losses.

According to one US official who observed the war closely, the IAF's air offensive degraded "perhaps only 7%" of the total military resource assets available to Hezbollah's fighters in the first three days of fighting and added that, in his opinion, Israeli air attacks on the Hezbollah leadership were "absolutely futile".

Reports that the Hezbollah senior leadership had taken refuge in the Iranian Embassy in Beirut (untouched during Israel's aerial offensive) are not true, though it is not known precisely where the Hezbollah leadership did take shelter. "Not even I knew where I was," Hezbollah leader Nasrallah told one of his associates. Even with all of this, it is not the case that the Israeli military's plans to destroy Lebanon's infrastructure resulted from the IAF's inability to degrade Hezbollah's military capacity in the war's first days.

The Israeli military's plans called for an early and sustained bombardment of Lebanon's major highways and ports in addition to its plans to destroy Hezbollah military and political assets. The Israeli government made no secret of its intent - to undercut Hezbollah's support in the Christian, Sunni and Druze communities. That idea, to punish Lebanon for harboring Hezbollah and so turn the people against the militia, had been a part of Israel's plan since the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000.

While IDF officials confidently and publicly announced success in their offensive, their commanders recommended that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert approve increased air sorties against potential Hezbollah caches in marginal target areas at the end of the first week of the bombing. Olmert approved these attacks, while knowing that in making such a request his senior officers had all but admitted that their initial assessment of the damage inflicted on Hezbollah was exaggerated.

Qana was the result of Olmert's agreement to "stretch the target envelope". One US military expert who monitored the conflict closely had this to say of the Qana bombing: "This isn't really that complicated. After the failure of the initial campaign, IAF planning officers went back through their target folders to see if they had missed anything. When they decided they hadn't, someone probably stood up and went into the other room and returned with a set of new envelopes of targets in densely populated areas and said, 'Hey, what about these target envelopes?' And so they did it." That is, the

bombing of targets "close in" to southern Lebanon population areas was the result of Israel's failure in the war - not its success.

The "target stretching" escalated throughout the conflict; frustrated by their inability to identify and destroy major Hezbollah military assets, the IAF began targeting schools, community centers and mosques - under the belief that their inability to identify and interdict Hezbollah bunkers signaled Hezbollah's willingness to hide their major assets inside civilian centers.

IAF officers also argued that Hezbollah's ability to continue its rocket attacks on Israel meant that its militia was being continually resupplied. Qana is a crossroads, the junction of five separate highways, and in the heart of Hezbollah territory. Interdicting the Qana supply chain provided the IAF the opportunity to prove that Hezbollah was only capable of sustaining its operations because of its supply-dependence on the crossroads town. In truth, however, IDF senior commanders knew that expanding the number of targets in Lebanon would probably do little to degrade Hezbollah capabilities because Hezbollah was maintaining its attacks without any hope of resupply and because of its dependence on weapons and rocket caches that had been hardened against Israeli interdiction. In the wake of Qana, in which 28 civilians were killed, Israel agreed to a 48-hour ceasefire.

The ceasefire provided the first evidence that Hezbollah had successfully withstood Israeli air attacks and was planning a sustained and prolonged defense of southern Lebanon. Hezbollah commanders honored the ceasefire at the orders of their political superiors. With one or two lone exceptions, no rockets were fired into Israel during this ceasefire period. While Hezbollah's capacity actually to "cease fire" was otherwise ignored by Israeli and Western intelligence experts, Hezbollah's ability to enforce discipline on its field commanders came as a distinctly unwanted shock to IDF senior commanders, who concluded that Hezbollah's communication's capabilities had survived Israel's air onslaught, that the Hezbollah leadership was in touch with its commanders on the ground, and that those commanders were able to maintain a robust communications network despite Israeli interdiction.

More simply, Hezbollah's ability to cease fire meant that Israel's goal of separating Hezbollah fighters from their command structure (considered a necessity by modern armies in waging a war on a sophisticated technological battlefield) had failed. The IDF's senior commanders could only come to one conclusion - its prewar information on Hezbollah military assets was, at best, woefully incomplete or, at worst, fatally wrong.

In fact, over a period of two years, Hezbollah intelligence officials had built a significant signals-counterintelligence capability. Throughout the war, Hezbollah commanders were able to predict when and where Israeli fighters and bombers would strike. Moreover, Hezbollah had identified key Israeli human-intelligence assets in Lebanon. One month prior to the abduction of the IDF border patrol and the subsequent Israeli attack, Lebanese intelligence officials had broken up an Israeli spy ring operating inside the country.

Lebanese (and Hezbollah) intelligence officials arrested at least 16 Israeli spies in Lebanon, though they failed to find or arrest the leader of the ring. Moreover, during two years from 2004 until the eve of the war, Hezbollah had successfully "turned" a number of Lebanese civilian assets reporting on the location of major Hezbollah military caches in southern Lebanon to Israeli intelligence officers. In some small number of crucially important cases, Hezbollah senior intelligence officials were able to "feed back" false information on their militia's most important emplacements to Israel - with the result that Israel target folders identified key emplacements that did not, in fact, exist.

Finally, Hezbollah's ability to intercept and "read" Israeli actions had a decisive impact on the coming ground war. Hezbollah intelligence officials had perfected their signals-intelligence capability to such an extent that they could intercept Israeli ground communications between Israeli military commanders. Israel, which depended on a highly sophisticated set of "frequency hopping" techniques that would allow their commanders to communicate with one another, underestimated Hezbollah's ability to master counter-signals technology. The result would have a crucial impact on Israel's calculation that surprise alone would provide the margin of victory for its soldiers.

It now is clear that the Israeli political establishment was shocked by the failure of its forces to accomplish its first military goals in the war - including the degradation of a significant number of Hezbollah arsenals and the destruction of Hezbollah's command capabilities.

But the Israeli political establishment had done almost nothing to prepare for the worst: the first meeting of the Israeli security cabinet in the wake of the July 12 abduction lasted only three hours. And while Olmert and his security cabinet demanded minute details of the IDF's plan for the first three days of the war, they failed to articulate clear political goals in the aftermath of the conflict or sketch out a political exit strategy should the offensive fail.

Olmert and the security cabinet violated the first principle of war - they showed contempt for their enemy. In many respects, Olmert and his cabinet were captives of an unquestioned belief in the efficacy of Israeli deterrence. Like the Israeli public, they viewed any questioning of IDF capabilities as sacrilege.

The Israeli intelligence failure during the conflict was catastrophic. It meant that, after the failure of Israel's air campaign to degrade Hezbollah assets significantly in the first 72 hours of the war, Israel's chance of winning a decisive victory against Hezbollah was increasingly, and highly, unlikely.

"Israel lost the war in the first three days," one US military expert said. "If you have that kind of surprise and you have that kind of firepower, you had better win. Otherwise, you're in for the long haul."

IDF senior officers concluded that, given the failure of the air campaign, they had only

one choice - to invade Lebanon with ground troops in the hopes of destroying Hezbollah's will to prevail.

PART 2: Winning the ground war

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Israel's decision to launch a ground war to accomplish what its air force had failed to do was made hesitantly and haphazardly. While Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) units had been making forays into southern Lebanon during the second week of the conflict, the Israeli military leadership remained undecided over when and where - even whether - to deploy their ground units.

In part, the army's indecisiveness over when, where and whether to deploy its major ground units was a function of the air force's claims to victory. The Israeli Air Force (IAF) kept claiming that it would succeed from the air - in just one more day, and then another. This indecision was mirrored by the Western media's uncertainty about when a ground campaign would take place - or whether in fact it had already occurred.

Senior Israeli officers continued to tell their press contacts that the timing of a ground offensive was a tightly kept secret when, in fact, they didn't know themselves. The hesitation was also the result of the experience of small IDF units that had already penetrated beyond the border. Special IDF units operating in southern Lebanon were reporting to their commanders as early as July 18 that Hezbollah units were fighting tenaciously to hold their positions on the first ridgeline overlooking Israel.

At this point, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made a political decision: he would deploy the full might of the IDF to defeat Hezbollah at the same time that his top aides signaled Israel's willingness to accept a ceasefire and the deployment of an international force. Olmert determined that Israel should not tip its hand - it would accept the deployment of a United Nations force, but only as a last resort.

First, he decided, Israel would say that it would accept a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) force. In keeping with this strategy, Israeli reserve forces were called to the front on July 21. The surprise call-up (the IDF was to defeat Hezbollah first from the air, and then - if that failed - use its regular forces, with no reserve forces to be called) made the initial deployment of the reserves hurried and uncoordinated. (It is, to repeat, likely that Israel did not believe it would have to call on its reserves during the conflict, or it would have called them much earlier.)

Moreover, the decision to call the reserves took key senior reserve officers, usually the first to be notified of a pending call-up, by surprise. The reserve call-up was handled chaotically - with the reserve "tail" of logistical support lagging some 24-48 hours behind the deployment of reserve forces.

The July 21 call-up was a clear sign to military strategists in the Pentagon that Israel's war was not going well. It also helps to explain why Israeli reserve troops arrived at the front without the necessary equipment, without a coherent battle plan, and without the munitions necessary to carry on the fight. (Throughout the conflict, Israel struggled to provide adequate support to its reserve forces: food, ammunition and even water supplies reached units a full 24-48 hours behind a unit's appearance at its assigned northern deployment zones.)

The effect of this was immediately perceived by military observers. "Israeli troops looked unprepared, sloppy and demoralized," one former senior US commander noted. "This wasn't the vaunted IDF that we saw in previous wars."

In keeping with Olmert's political ploy, the IDF's goal of the total destruction of Hezbollah was also being markedly scaled back. "There is one line between our military objectives and our political objectives," Brigadier-General Ido Nehushtan, a member of Israel's general staff, said on the day after the reserve call-up. "The goal is not necessarily to eliminate every Hezbollah rocket. What we must do is disrupt the military logic of Hezbollah. I would say that this is still not a matter of days away."

This was a decidedly strange way of presenting a military strategy - to conduct a war to "disrupt the military logic" of an enemy. Nehushtan's statement had a chilling effect on IDF ground commanders, who wondered exactly what the war's goals were. But other IDF commanders were upbeat - while the IAF had failed to stop Hezbollah rocket attacks on Israeli cities, fewer rockets were fired at Israel from July 19-21 than at any other time (a very small number on July 19, perhaps as few as 40 on July 20 and 50 on July 22).

July 22 also marks the first time that the United States responded militarily to the conflict. Late on the day of the 21st, the White House received a request from Olmert and the IDF for the provision of large amounts of precision-guided munitions - another telltale sign that the IAF had failed in its mission to degrade Hezbollah military assets significantly during the opening rounds of the war.

The request was quickly approved and the munitions were shipped to Israel beginning on the morning of July 22. Senior Pentagon officials were dismayed by the shipment, as it meant that Israel had expended most of its munitions in the war's first 10 days - an enormous targeting expenditure that suggested Israel had abandoned tactical bombing of Hezbollah assets and was poised for an onslaught on what remained of Lebanon's infrastructure, a strategy that had not worked during World War II, when the United States and Britain destroyed Germany's 66 major population centers without any discernable impact either on German morale or military capabilities.

But there was little grumbling in the Pentagon, though one former serving officer observed that the deployment of US munitions to Israel was reminiscent of a similar

request made by Israel in 1973 - at the height of the Yom Kippur War. "This can only mean one thing," this officer said at the time. "They're on the ropes."

In spite of its deep misgivings about the Israeli response (and the misgivings, though unreported, were deep and significant - and extended even into the upper echelons of the US Air Force), senior US military officers kept their views out of public view. And for good reason: criticism of Israel for requesting a shipment of arms during the 1973 war led to the resignation of then Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) chairman General George Brown. Brown was enraged that US weapons and munitions were being sent to Israel at the same time that American commanders in Vietnam were protesting a lack of supplies in their war in Southeast Asia.

The current JCS chairman, Peter Pace, who remained notably silent during the Israeli-Hezbollah war, understood history, saluted, and remained silent. But the JCS and senior military commanders were not the only US officials who were worried about Israel's performance. While the new US munitions were winging their way to Israel (via Prestwick, Scotland), intelligence officials were conducting initial assessments of the war's opening days, including one noting that in spite of the sustained Israeli air offensive, Al-Manar was still broadcasting in Beirut, though the IAF had destroyed the broadcast bands of Lebanon's other major networks. (This would remain true throughout the war - Al-Manar never went off the air.) How effective could the Israeli air campaign have been if they couldn't even knock out a television station's transmissions?

The call-up of Israel's reserves was meant to buttress forces already fighting in southern Lebanon, and to add weight to the ground assault. On July 22, Hezbollah units of the Nasr Brigade fought the IDF street-to-street in Maroun al-Ras. While the IDF claimed at the end of the day that it had taken the town, it had not. The fighting had been bloody, but Hezbollah fighters had not been dislodged. Many of the Nasr Brigade's soldiers had spent countless days waiting for the Israeli assault and, because of Hezbollah's ability to intercept IDF military communications, Israeli soldiers bumped up against units that were well entrenched.

IDF detachments continually failed to flank the defenders, meeting counterpunches toward the west of the city. Special three-man hunter-killer teams from the Nasr Brigade destroyed several Israeli armored vehicles during the fight with light man-made anti-tank missiles. "We knew they were going to do this," Ilay Talmor, an exhausted Israeli second lieutenant, said at the time. "This is territory they say is theirs. We would do the same thing if someone came into our country."

While the IDF continued to insist that its incursions would be "limited in scope", despite the recall of thousands of reserve troops, IDF battalions began to form south of the border. "We are not preparing for an invasion of Lebanon," said Avi Pazner, a senior Israeli government spokesman. The IDF then called Maroun al-Ras its "first foothold" in southern Lebanon. "A combination of air force, artillery and ground-force pressure will push Hezbollah out without arriving at the point where we have to invade and occupy," Pazner said.

The difference between "pushing" out a force and invading and occupying a town was thereby set, another clear signal to US military experts that the IDF could enter a town

but could not occupy it. One US officer schooled in US military history compared the IDF's foray into southern Lebanon to Robert E Lee's bloody attack on Union positions at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, during the American Civil War. "Oh I can get there, all right," Lee's lieutenant said during that war, "it's staying there that's the problem."

After-battle reports of Hezbollah commanders now confirm that IDF troops never fully secured the border area and Maroun al-Ras was never fully taken. Nor did Hezbollah ever feel the need to call up its reserves, as Israel had done. "The entire war was fought by one Hezbollah brigade of 3,000 troops, and no more," one military expert in the region said. "The Nasr Brigade fought the entire war. Hezbollah never felt the need to reinforce it."

Reports from Lebanon underscore this point. Much to their surprise, Hezbollah commanders found that Israeli troops were poorly organized and disciplined. The only Israeli unit that performed up to standards was the Golani Brigade, according to Lebanese observers. The IDF was "a motley assortment", one official with a deep knowledge of US slang reported. "But that's what happens when you have spent four decades firing rubber bullets at women and children in the West Bank and Gaza."

IDF commanders were also disturbed by the performance of their troops, noting a signal lack of discipline even among its best-trained regular soldiers. The reserves were worse, and IDF commanders hesitated to put them into battle.

On July 25, Olmert's strategy of backing down from a claimed goal to destroy Hezbollah was in full force. The Israeli Defense Minister Amir Peretz was the bearer of these tidings, saying that Israel's current goal was to create a "security zone" in southern Lebanon. His words were accompanied by a threat: "If there is not a multinational force that will get in to control the fences, we will continue to control with our fire towards anyone that gets close to the defined security zone, and they will know that they can be hurt."

Gone quite suddenly was a claim that Israel would destroy Hezbollah; gone too was a claim that only NATO would be acceptable as a peacekeeping unit on the border. On July 25, Israel also reported that Abu Jaafar, a commander of Hezbollah's "central sector" on the Lebanese border, was killed "in an exchange of fire" with Israeli troops near the border village of Maroun al-Ras - which had not yet been taken. The report was not true. Abu Jaafar made public comments after the end of the war.

Later on July 25, during US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit to Jerusalem, the Israeli military fought its way into Bint Jbeil, calling it "Hezbollah's terror capital". The fight for Bint Jbeil went on for nine days. But it remained in Hezbollah hands until the end of the conflict. By then, the town had been destroyed, as Hezbollah fighters were able to survive repeated air and artillery shelling, retreating into their bunkers during the worst of the air and artillery campaign, and only emerging when IDF troops in follow-on operations tried to claim the city.

The Hezbollah tactics were reminiscent of those followed by the North Vietnamese Army during the opening days of the Vietnam conflict - when NVA commanders told their troops that they needed to "ride out the bombs" and then fight the Americans in small unit actions. "You must grab them by their belt buckles," a Vietnamese

commander said in describing these tactics.

On July 24, as yet another sign of its looming failure in Lebanon, Israel deployed the first of thousands of cluster munitions against what it called "Hezbollah emplacements" in southern Lebanon. Cluster munitions are an effective, if vicious, combat tool and those nations that use them, including every single member of NATO (as well as Russia and China), have consistently refused to enter an international agreement banning their use.

The most responsible nation-states that use them, however, "double fuse" their munitions to cut down on the failure rate of the "bomblets" after they have been deployed. During the administration of US president Bill Clinton, defense secretary William Cohen agreed to the double-fusing of US cluster munitions and a phase-out of the "high dud rate" munitions in the US stockpile, which was intended to cut the failure rate of these munitions from 14% (some estimates are higher) to less than 3% (though some estimates are lower).

While investigations into Israel's use of these munitions is not yet complete, it now appears that the IDF deployed single-fused munitions. Recent reports in the Israeli press indicate that artillery officers carpeted dozens of Lebanese villages with the bomblets - as close to the definition of the "indiscriminate" use of firepower as one can get.

The Israeli munitions may well have been purchased from aging US stockpiles that were not double-fused, making the United States complicit in this indiscriminate targeting. Such a conclusion seems to fit with the time-line of the resupply of munitions to Israel on July 22. The IDF may well have been able to offload these munitions and deploy them quickly enough to have created the cluster-munitions crisis in Lebanon that plagues that nation still - and that started on July 24.

On July 26, IDF officials conceded that the previous 24 hours in their fight for Bint Jbail was "the hardest day of fighting in southern Lebanon". After failing to take the town from Hezbollah in the morning, IDF commanders decided to send in their elite Golani Brigade. In two hours in the afternoon, nine Golani Brigade soldiers were killed and 22 were wounded. Late in the afternoon, the IDF deployed its elite Paratroopers Brigade to Maroun al-Ras, where fighting with elements of the Nasr Brigade was in its third day.

On July 27, in response to the failure of its units to take these cities, the Israeli government agreed to a call-up of three more reserve divisions - a full 15,000 troops. By July 28, however, it was becoming clear just how severe the failure of the IAF had been in its attempts to stop Hezbollah rocket attacks. On that day, Hezbollah deployed a new rocket, the Khaibar-1, which hit Afula.

On July 28, the severity of Israel's intelligence failures finally reached the Israeli public. On that day, Mossad officials leaked information that, by their estimate, Hezbollah had not suffered a significant degradation in its military capabilities, and that the organization might be able to carry on the conflict for several more months. The IDF disagreed, stating that Hezbollah had been severely damaged. The first cracks in the Israeli intelligence community were beginning to show.

Experts in the US were also beginning to question Israel's strategy and capability. The conservative Brookings Institution published a commentary by Philip H Gordon (who blamed Hezbollah for the crisis) advising, "The issue is not whether Hezbollah is responsible for this crisis - it is - or whether Israel has the right to defend itself - it does - but whether this particular strategy [of a sustained air campaign] will work. It will not. It will not render Hezbollah powerless, because it is simply impossible to eliminate thousands of small, mobile, hidden and easily resupplied rockets via an air campaign."

Gordan's commentary reflected the views of an increasing number of military officers, who were scrambling to dust off their own air plans in the case of a White House order targeting Iranian nuclear sites. "There is a common misperception that the [US] Air Force was thrilled by the Israeli war against Lebanon," one Middle East expert with access to senior Pentagon officials told us. "They were aghast. They well know the limits of their own power and they know how it can be abused."

"It seemed to them [USAF officers] that Israel threw away the book in Lebanon. This wasn't surgical, it wasn't precise, and it certainly wasn't smart. You can't just coat a country in iron and hope to win."

The cold, harsh numbers of the war point up the fallacy of the Israeli air and ground campaign. Hezbollah had secreted upwards of 18,000 rockets in its arsenals prior to the conflict. These sites were hardened against Israeli air strikes and easily survived the air campaign. Hezbollah officials calculated that from the time of firing until the IAF was able to identify and deploy fighters to take out the mobile rockets was 90 seconds. Through years of diligent training, Hezbollah rocket teams had learned to deploy, fire and safely cover their mobile launchers in less than 60 seconds, with the result that IAF planes and helicopters (which Israel has in much fewer numbers than it boasts) could not stop Hezbollah's continued rocket fire at Israel ("Israel is about three helicopters away from a total disaster," one US military officer commented).

Hezbollah fired about 4,000 rockets at Israel (a more precise, though uncertain, figure calculates the firing of 4,180 rockets), bringing its stockpiles down to 14,000 rockets - enough to prosecute the war for at least three more months.

Moreover, and more significant, Hezbollah's fighters proved to be dedicated and disciplined. Using intelligence assets to pinpoint Israeli infantry penetrations, they proved the equal of Israel's best fighting units. In some cases, Israeli units were defeated on the field of battle, forced into sudden retreats or forced to rely on air cover to save elements from being overrun. Even toward the end of the war, on August 9, the IDF announced that 15 of its reserve soldiers were killed and 40 wounded in fighting in the villages of Marjayoun, Khiam and Kila - a stunning casualty rate for a marginal piece of real estate.

The robust Hezbollah defense was also taking its toll on Israeli armor. When Israel finally agreed to a ceasefire and began its withdrawal from the border area, it left behind upwards of 40 armored vehicles, nearly all of them destroyed by expertly deployed AT-3 "Sagger" anti-tank missiles - which is the NATO name for the Russian-made vehicle- or man-deployed, wire-guided, second-generation 9M14 Malyutka - or "Little Baby".

With a range of 3 kilometers, the Sagger proved enormously successful in taking on

Israeli tanks, a fact that must have given Israeli armor commanders fits, in large part because the Sagger missile deployed by Hezbollah is an older version (developed and deployed in 1973) of a more modern version that is more easily hidden and deployed and has a larger warhead. If the IDF could not protect its armor against the 1973 "second generation" version, IDF commanders must now be wondering how it can possibly protect itself against a version that is more modern, more sophisticated, and more deadly.

Prior to the implementation of the ceasefire, the Israeli political establishment decided that it would "clear drop" Israeli paratroopers in key areas along the Litani River. The decision was apparently made to convince the international community that the rules of engagement for a UN force should extend from the Litani south. Such a claim could not be made unless Israel could credibly claim to have cleared that part of Lebanon to the Litani.

A significant number of Israeli forces were airlifted into key areas just south of the Litani to accomplish this goal. The decision might well have led to a disaster. Most of the Israeli forces airlifted to these sites were immediately surrounded by Hezbollah units and may well have been decisively mauled had a ceasefire not gone into effect. The political decision angered retired IDF officers, one of whom accused Olmert of "spinning the military" - using the military for public relations purposes.

Perhaps the most telling sign of Israel's military failure comes in counting the dead and wounded. Israel now claims that it killed about 400-500 Hezbollah fighters, while its own losses were significantly less. But a more precise accounting shows that Israeli and Hezbollah casualties were nearly even. It is impossible for Shi'ites (and Hezbollah) not to allow an honorable burial for its martyrs, so in this case it is simply a matter of counting funerals. Fewer than 180 funerals have been held for Hezbollah fighters - nearly equal to the number killed on the Israeli side. That number may be revised upward: our most recent information from Lebanon says the number of Shi'ite martyr funerals in the south can now be precisely tabulated at 184.

But by any accounting - whether in rockets, armored vehicles or numbers of dead and wounded - Hezbollah's fight against Israel must be accorded a decisive military and political victory. Even if it were otherwise (and it is clearly not), the full impact of Hezbollah's war with Israel over a period of 34 days in July and August has caused a political earthquake in the region.

Hezbollah's military defeat of Israel was decisive, but its political defeat of the United States - which unquestioningly sided with Israel during the conflict and refused to bring it to an end - was catastrophic and has had a lasting impact on US prestige in the region.

PART 3: The political war

By Alastair Crooke and Mark Perry

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In the wake of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict, a public poll in Egypt asked a cross-section of that country's citizenry to name the two political leaders they most admired. An overwhelming number named Hassan Nasrallah. Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad finished second.

The poll was a clear repudiation not only of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who had made his views against Hezbollah known at the outset of the conflict, but of those Sunni leaders, including Saudi King Abdullah and Jordan's Abdullah II, who criticized the Shi'ite group in an avowed attempt to turn the Sunni world away from support of Iran.

"By the end of the war these guys were scrambling for the exits," one US diplomat from the region said in late August. "You haven't heard much from them lately, have you?"

Mubarak and the two Abdullahs are not the only ones scrambling for the exits - the United States' foreign policy in the region, even in light of its increasingly dire deployment in Iraq, is in a shambles. "What that means is that all the doors are closed to us, in Cairo, in Amman, in Saudi Arabia," another diplomat averred. "Our access has been curtailed. No one will see us. When we call no one picks up the phone."

A talisman of this collapse can be seen in the itinerary of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, whose inability to persuade President George W Bush to halt the fighting and her remark about the conflict as marking "the birth pangs" of a new Middle East in effect destroyed her credibility.

The US has made it clear that it will attempt to retrieve its position by backing a yet-to-be-announced Israeli-Palestinian peace plan, but America's continued strangulation of the democratically constituted government of the Palestinian Authority has transformed that pledge into a stillborn political program. The reason for this is now eminently clear. In the midst of the war, a European official in Cairo had this to say about the emotions roiling the Egyptian political environment: "The Egyptian leadership is walking down one side of the street," he said, "and the Egyptian people are walking down the other."

The catastrophic failure of Israeli arms has buoyed Iran's claim to leadership of the Muslim world in several critical areas.

First, the Hezbollah victory has shown that Israel - and any modern and technologically sophisticated Western military force - can be defeated in open battle, if the proper military tactics are employed and if they are sustained over a prolonged period. Hezbollah has provided the model for the defeat of a modern army. The tactics are simple: ride out the first wave of a Western air campaign, then deploy rocket forces targeting key military and economic assets of the enemy, then ride out a second and

more critical air campaign, and then prolong the conflict for an extended period. At some point, as in the case of Israel's attack on Hezbollah, the enemy will be forced to commit ground troops to accomplish what its air forces could not. It is in this last, and critical, phase that a dedicated, well-trained and well-led force can exact enormous pain on a modern military establishment and defeat it.

Second, the Hezbollah victory has shown the people of the Muslim world that the strategy employed by Western-allied Arab and Muslim governments - a policy of appeasing US interests in the hopes of gaining substantive political rewards (a recognition of Palestinian rights, fair pricing for Middle Eastern resources, non-interference in the region's political structures, and free, fair and open elections) - cannot and will not work. The Hezbollah victory provides another and different model, of shattering US hegemony and destroying its stature in the region. Of the two most recent events in the Middle East, the invasion of Iraq and the Hezbollah victory over Israel, the latter is by far the most important. Even otherwise anti-Hezbollah groups, including those associated with revolutionary Sunni resistance movements who look on Shi'ites as apostates, have been humbled.

Third, the Hezbollah victory has had a shattering impact on America's allies in the region. Israeli intelligence officials calculated that Hezbollah could carry on its war for upwards of three months after its end in the middle of August. Hezbollah's calculations reflected Israel's findings, with the caveat that neither the Hezbollah nor Iranian leadership could predict what course to follow after a Hezbollah victory. While Jordan's intelligence services locked down any pro-Hezbollah demonstrations, Egypt's intelligence services were struggling to monitor the growing public dismay over the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon.

Open support for Hezbollah across the Arab world (including, strangely, portraits of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah carried in the midst of Christian celebrations) has put those Arab rulers closest to the United States on notice: a further erosion in their status could loosen their hold on their own nations. It seems likely that as a result, Mubarak and the two Abdullahs are very unlikely to support any US program calling for economic, political or military pressures on Iran. A future war - perhaps a US military campaign against Iran's nuclear sites - might not unseat the government in Tehran, but it could well unseat the governments of Egypt, Jordan and perhaps Saudi Arabia.

At a key point in the Israel-Hezbollah contest, toward the end of the war, Islamist party leaders in a number of countries wondered whether they would be able to continue their control over their movements or whether, as they feared, political action would be ceded to street captains and revolutionaries. The singular notion, now common in intelligence circles in the United States, is that it was Israel (and not Hezbollah) that, as of August 10, was looking for a way out of the conflict.

Fourth, the Hezbollah victory has dangerously weakened the Israeli government. In the wake of Israel's last lost war, in 1973, Prime Minister Menachem Begin decided to accept a peace proposal from Egyptian president Anwar Sadat. The breakthrough was, in fact, rather modest - as both parties were allies of the United States. No such breakthrough will take place in the wake of the Israel-Hezbollah war.

Israel believes that it has lost its deterrent capabilities and that they must be retrieved. Some Israeli officials in Washington now confirm that it is not a matter of "if" but of "when" Israel goes to war again. Yet it is difficult to determine how Israel can do that. To fight and win against Hezbollah, Israel will need to retrain and refit its army. Like the United States after the Vietnam debacle, Israel will have to restructure its military leadership and rebuild its intelligence assets. That will take years, not months.

It may be that Israel will opt, in future operations, for the deployment of ever bigger weapons against ever larger targets. Considering its performance in Lebanon, such uses of ever larger weapons could spell an even more robust response. This is not out of the question. A US attack on Iranian nuclear installations would likely be answered by an Iranian missile attack on Israel's nuclear installations - and on Israeli population centers. No one can predict how Israel would react to such an attack, but it is clear that (given Bush's stance in the recent conflict) the United States would do nothing to stop it. The "glass house" of the Persian Gulf region, targeted by Iranian missiles, would then assuredly come crashing down.

Fifth, the Hezbollah victory spells the end of any hope of a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, at least in the short and medium terms. Even normally "progressive" Israeli political figures undermined their political position with strident calls for more force, more troops and more bombs. In private meetings with his political allies, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas castigated those who cheered on Hezbollah's victory, calling them " Hamas supporters" and "enemies of Israel". Abbas is in a far more tenuous position than Mubarak or the two Abdullahs - his people's support for Hamas continues, as does his slavish agreement with George W Bush, who told him on the sidelines of the United Nations Security Council meeting that he was to end all attempts to form a unity government with his fellow citizens.

Sixth, the Hezbollah victory has had the very unfortunate consequence of blinding Israel's political leadership to the realities of their geostrategic position. In the midst of the war with Lebanon, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert adopted Bush's language on the "war on terrorism", reminding his citizenry that Hezbollah was a part of "the axis of evil". His remarks have been reinforced by Bush, whose comments during his address before the UN General Assembly mentioned al-Qaeda once - and Hezbollah and Hamas five times each. The United States and Israel have now lumped Islamist groups willing to participate in the political processes in their own nations with those takfiris and Salafists who are bent on setting the region on fire.

Nor can Israel now count on its strongest US supporters that network of neo-conservatives for whom Israel is an island of stability and democracy in the region. These neo-conservatives' disapproval of Israel's performance is almost palpable. With friends like these, who needs enemies? That is to say, the Israeli conflict in Lebanon reflects accurately those experts who see the Israel-Hezbollah conflict as a proxy war. Our colleague Jeff Aronson noted that "if it were up to the US, Israel would still be fighting", and he added: "The United States will fight the war on terrorism to the last drop of Israeli blood."

The continued weakness of the Israeli political leadership and the fact that it is in denial about the depth of its defeat should be a deep concern for the United States and for every Arab nation. Israel has proved that in times of crisis, it can shape a creative

diplomatic strategy and maneuver deftly to retrieve its position. It has also proved that in the wake of a military defeat, it is capable of honest and transparent self-examination. Israel's strength has always been its capacity for public debate, even if such debate questions the most sacrosanct institution - the Israel Defense Forces. At key moments in Israel's history, defeat has led to reflection and not, as now seems likely, an increasingly escalating military offensive against Hamas - the red-headed stepchild of the Middle East - to show just how tough it is.

"The fact that the Middle East has been radicalized by the Hezbollah victory presents a good case for killing more of them," one Israeli official recently said. That path will lead to disaster. In light of America's inability to pull the levers of change in the Middle East, there is hope among some in Washington that Olmert will show the political courage to begin the long process of finding peace. That process will be painful, it will involve long and difficult discussions, it may mean a break with the US program for the region. But the US does not live in the region, and Israel does. While conducting a political dialogue with its neighbors might be painful, it will prove far less painful than losing a war in Lebanon.

Seventh, Hezbollah's position in Lebanon has been immeasurably strengthened, as has the position of its most important ally. At the height of the conflict, Lebanese Christians took Hezbollah refugees into their homes. The Christian leader Michel Aoun openly supported Hezbollah's fight. One Hezbollah leader said: "We will never forget what that man did for us, not for an entire generation." Aoun's position is celebrated among the Shi'ites, and his own political position has been enhanced.

The Sunni leadership, on the other hand, fatally undermined itself with its uncertain stance and its absentee landlord approach to its own community. In the first week of the war, Hezbollah's actions were greeted with widespread skepticism. At the end of the war its support was solid and stretched across Lebanon's political and sectarian divides. The Sunni leadership now has a choice: it can form a unity government with new leaders that will create a more representative government or they can stand for elections. It doesn't take a political genius to understand which choice Saad Hariri, the majority leader in the Lebanese parliament, will make.

Eighth, Iran's position in Iraq has been significantly enhanced. In the midst of the Lebanon conflict, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld privately worried that the Israeli offensive would have dire consequences for the US military in Iraq, who faced increasing hostility from Shi'ite political leaders and the Shi'ite population. Rice's statement that the pro-Hezbollah demonstrations in Baghdad were planned by Tehran revealed her ignorance of the most fundamental political facts of the region. The US secretaries of state and of defense were simply and unaccountably unaware that the Sadrs of Baghdad bore any relationship to the Sadrs of Lebanon. That Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki would not castigate Hezbollah and side with Israel during the conflict - and in the midst of an official visit to Washington - was viewed as shocking by Washington's political establishment, even though "Hezbollah in Iraq" is one of the parties in the current Iraqi coalition government.

We have been told that neither the Pentagon nor the State Department understood how the war in Lebanon might effect America's position in Iraq because neither the Pentagon nor the State Department asked for a briefing on the issue from the US intelligence

services. The United States spends billions of dollars each year on its intelligence collection and analysis activities. It is money wasted.

Ninth, Syria's position has been strengthened and the US-French program for Lebanon has failed. There is no prospect that Lebanon will form a government that is avowedly pro-American or anti-Syrian. That Syrian President Bashar al-Assad could, in the wake of the war, suggest a political arrangement with Israel shows his strength, not his weakness. That he might draw the correct conclusions from the conflict and believe that he too might successfully oppose Israel is also possible.

But aside from these possibilities, recent history shows that those thousands of students and Lebanese patriots who protested Syria's involvement in Lebanon after the death of Rafiq Hariri found it ironic that they took refuge from the Israeli bombing in tent cities established by the Syrian government. Rice is correct on one thing: Syria's willingness to provide refuge for Lebanese refugees was a pure act of political cynicism - and one that the United States seems incapable of replicating. Syria now is confident of its political position. In a previous era, such confidence allowed Israel to shape a political opening with its most intransigent political enemies.

Tenth, and perhaps most important, it now is clear that a US attack on Iranian nuclear installations would be met with little support in the Muslim world. It would also be met by a military response that would collapse the last vestiges of America's political power in the region. What was thought to be a "given" just a few short weeks ago has been shown to be unlikely. Iran will not be cowed. If the United States launches a military campaign against the Tehran government, it is likely that America's friends will fall by the wayside, the Gulf Arab states will tremble in fear, the 138,000 US soldiers in Iraq will be held hostage by an angered Shi'ite population, and Iran will respond by an attack on Israel. We would now dare say the obvious - if and when such an attack comes, the United States will be defeated.

Conclusion

The victory of Hezbollah in its recent conflict with Israel is far more significant than many analysts in the United States and Europe realize. The Hezbollah victory reverses the tide of 1967 - a shattering defeat of Egypt, Syria and Jordan that shifted the region's political plates, putting in place regimes that were bent on recasting their own foreign policy to reflect Israeli and US power. That power now has been sullied and reversed, and a new leadership is emerging in the region.

The singular lesson of the conflict may well be lost on the upper echelons of Washington's and London's pro-Israel, pro-values, we-are-fighting-for-civilization political elites, but it is not lost in the streets of Cairo, Amman, Ramallah, Baghdad, Damascus or Tehran. It should not be lost among the Israeli political leadership in Jerusalem. The Arab armies of 1967 fought for six days and were defeated. The Hezbollah militia in Lebanon fought for 34 days and won. We saw this with our own eyes when we looked into the cafes of Cairo and Amman, where simple shopkeepers, farmers and workers gazed at television reports, sipped their tea, and silently mouthed the numbers to themselves: "seven", "eight", "nine" ...

http://www.radioislam.org/lebanon/resistance/Winning_the_intelligence_war.htm

http://www.radioislam.org/lebanon/resistance/Winning_the_ground_war.htm

http://www.radioislam.org/lebanon/resistance/The_political_war.htm